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U. S. Department of Agriculture

Housekeepers' Chat

Tuesday, July 15, 1930

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Fighting the Flea." Information from F. C. Bishopp, Bureau of Entomology, U. S. D. A.

Bulletin available: "Flea Control," "Food Poisoning and the Law," "Canning Fruits and Vegetables at Home."

--ooOoo--

Yesterday morning I had a telephone call from the man who lives on the corner, down by the drug store.

"My wife told me to call," he said. "She's frantic! We have fleas in the house, and relatives arriving on Sunday. If the fleas don't vacate, before Aunt Emmy Lou and her retinue arrive, my wife says she'll never speak to me again. As if I am responsible for the fleas! It's the cat -- I told her what would happen!"

"Told the cat?" I asked.

"No! I told my wife if she didn't keep the cat out of the house, there'd be fleas to fight pretty soon. Don't you know any way to get rid of them, Aunt Sammy?"

Well, as it happened, I did know what to do in this particular case. I told the man to go to the drugstore, buy some flaked naphthalene (moth balls in flaked form), and put it on the floor. If a pet cat has been sleeping in a house, and has started fleas breeding in the rugs and cracks of the floor, the best thing to do is to beat and sun the rugs, and put five pounds of flaked naphthalene on the floor. Leave the room shut up overnight.

It isn't necessary to dispose of the cat. Dust it lightly with derris every two weeks, and keep stray animals off the premises.

After this telephone call, I decided I'd better find out more about fleas, before someone asked me a question I couldn't answer. So I got in touch with Mr. F. C. Bishop of the Department of Agriculture, and found out what he has to say on this lively subject. To begin with, he's "agin 'em." Fleas, according to Mr. Bishopp, are here for no good purpose. They are carriers of the dread bubonic plague, and other diseases and parasites. Fortunately, we are little concerned with the flea as a disease carrier, so long as plague is kept out of the country by quarantine restriction, but we are concerned with the invasions of our home, the annoyance of our pet animals, and the destruction of our poultry by these "jumping denizens of the underworld." "So," says Mr. Bishopp, "we have no scruples about shooting to kill."

These are facts I learned from Mr. Bishopp, about fleas:

"Fleas are blood suckers and always breed in the presence of warm blooded animals. Most house infestations come from pet animals sleeping in basements or out buildings, but hog pens may be the source of supply, especially in the Mississippi Valley.

"The first thing is to find where the fleas are breeding, then spray this area with creosote oil. This material should be applied with a good force pump. You should avoid breathing it, so begin spraying at the farther end of the basement and work toward the door. It will burn the skin, and plants, so don't get it on your face or body, and don't spray plants with it. It is instant death to fleas.

"To kill the fleas on the dog and cat dust them lightly with derris or fresh pyrethrum powder; one teaspoonful of derris will kill every flea on a big dog.

"If hog pens are the source of the fleas, clean up the litter and spray with creosote oil and use a little crank case oil on the hogs themselves.

"The sticktight flea of poultry breeds in chicken houses and under buildings. Spray these places with creosote oil.

"Treating flea bites is not a success, but spraying with creosote oil is. More about this lively subject is given in our Farmers' Bulletin on fleas. Write for it. It may help you put your finger on the trouble."

And that's that -- about fleas. Working in the U. S. Department of Agriculture is one way of getting a broad education. Seems to me I spend most of my spare time getting acquainted with specialists who can give answers to all these questions you ask me.

The next question is part of a letter: "Dear Aunt Sammy: I was much interested in your talk the other day, about 'Food Poisoning, and the Law.' May I please have ten copies of the bulletin? In our Home Economics Club, we are studying about the U. S. Department of Agriculture, and its sources of help for housewives. I have charge of the next meeting, and I think it would be interesting to tell how the Food, Drug, and Insecticide Administration helps to keep poisoned food out of circulation.

"I have a question, too. You mentioned botulism, the most serious form of food poisoning, the other day. I believe you said that the bacteria of botulism are scattered through the soil. How can we be sure that our home canned foods do not contain these bacteria?"

A very good question. The home canner can avoid danger from botulism by following five fundamental rules. These are the rules:

First: Use only clean, sound raw materials.

Second: Follow the most recent instructions for processing, making sure that this instruction applies at the altitude of the place where the canning is done. By the way, do you have a copy of the bulletin, "Canning Fruits and Vegetables at Home?" This bulletin is published by the Bureau of Home Economics, and contains rules for home canning, based on the most recent scientific research.

Third: Discard all defective cans and glass containers.

Fourth: Carefully examine all foods for signs of spoilage.

Fifth: Throw away, untasted, all food showing signs of spoilage.

And those are the five fundamental rules, for the home canner who wants to avoid danger from botulism.

Federal, State, and city food officials, so far as it is humanly possible to do so, see that all food sold in the United States is entirely fit for consumption. To stamp out food poisoning entirely, however, the ultimate consumer, particularly people like you and me, who prepare food in the kitchen, must take up the work where the Federal Government, the States, and the cities leave it. If each person preparing food for the table would follow the fundamental rules outlined in the little book, "Food Poisoning and the Law," and remember that sound food, freshly and thoroughly cooked, does not cause food poisoning, there would not be very many outbreaks of such illness.

Wednesday: "The Fourth National 4-H Club.Camp."

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